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Cassius M. Clay
and
Gerrit Smith



Class E 449

Book 10 6164

CASSIUS M. CLAY, and GERRIT SMITH.

**A Letter of Cassius M. Clay, of Lexington, Ky., to
the Mayor of Dayton, O., with a Review of it
by Gerrit Smith, of Peterboro, N. Y.**

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LEXINGTON, Ky., March 20, 1844.

W. J. McKINNEY, Esq., *Mayor of Dayton, Ohio.*

Dear Sir : Your letter of February 15th last, was in due time received, and I have waited thus long with the intention of not answering it at all: because, as I am a private citizen, not seeking office at the hands of the People, it might seem to place me in the presumptuous attitude of attempting to influence, by mere weight of opinion, the votes of my countrymen in their choice of President: when neither my age, experience, nor fame, warranted the assumption. But since the reception of your letter, I have received many of similar import, from Liberty men and Anti-Slavery Whigs in most of the Northern States, pressing upon me an expression of opinion, in such a manner that I should prove false to that spirit of candor which I proudly cherish as characteristic of the principles which I advocate, did I, through any affectation of humility, remain longer silent.

You ask me, "Will you, if you live and are able to vote at the approaching Presidential election, vote for Henry Clay for President? If the 'Third Party, or Liberty men, should have an Electoral Ticket in your State, would you vote that ticket in preference? Were you a citizen of Ohio, which of these tickets would you vote?"

The last two questions are such as would require various other suppositions to be made, before I could give a suitable answer in justice to myself and all the parties concerned, which would be too voluminous for the space of a single letter: and, for all practical purposes, they will be sufficiently answered in my reply to the first question: that, *It is my most*

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decided determination "to vote for HENRY CLAY for President." Men never have and never will, in all cases, think alike: all Government is necessarily a sacrifice, to some extent, of individual will: that is the best Government to each individual which fosters or allows the most of what that individual believes to be conducive to his best interests. The question then is not, 'Can I find some man to vote for among seventeen millions, who thinks in all respects as myself?' but, 'Who is the man, all things present and remote considered, that will most probably be able by success to give effectuation to those great measures which I deem conducive to my welfare, and the welfare of my whole country?' This question every voter in the Republic must determine for himself: For myself, after looking calmly upon all the surrounding circumstances, Conscience, Patriotism, and (if others prefer the term) enlightened self-interest, constrain me to vote for Henry Clay.

The Tariff, the Currency, the Lands, Economy, Executive and Ministerial Responsibility, and many other interests, all depend, in my humble judgment, on Mr. Clay's election for beneficial determination. And if he is elected, the decision of 1840 passed by the People, will be confirmed, and the policy of the country settled. Then, and (such is the anarchy of the public mind) not till then, shall we have time to look about us, and project that other great reform, the reduction of American Slavery to its constitutional limits, and to concentrate the united condemnation of the civilized world to its final and utter extinction.

Mr. Clay is indeed a Slaveholder—I wish he were not. Yet it does not become *me*, who have so lately ceased to be a Slaveholder myself, to condemn *him*. It is not my province to defend Mr. Clay; this he is abundantly able to do himself. It remains with posterity to determine how much shall be due him for the glorious impulse his fervent spirit has given to Liberty throughout the world: and with them also to say, how much shall be subtracted from this appreciation, for his only having failed to do all that could be done in this holy cause. Cyrus, Themistocles, Plato, Cato, Aristides, Demosthenes, Cincinnatus, and Cicero, sacrificed to base heathen gods: yet no man, because they knew not the true God, will say that they were not religious, great, good, and patriotic men. T. B. Macaulay, one of the most acute and enlightened men of this or any era, in his review of the life of Francis Bacon, justly says:

"We should think it unjust to call St. Louis a wicked man because, in an age in which toleration was generally regar-

ded as a sin, he persecuted heretics. We should think it unjust to call Cowper's friend, John Newton, a hypocrite and a monster, because, at a time when the slave-trade was commonly considered by the most respectable people as an innocent and beneficial traffic, he went, largely provided with hymn-books and handcuffs, on a Guinea voyage. An immoral action being in a particular society generally considered as innocent, is a good plea for an individual who being one of that society, and having adopted the notions which prevail among his neighbors, commits that action."

I cannot, then, because Mr. Clay is a slaveholder, in a community where the whole Christian Church of all denominations—the only professed teachers of morals among the people—are also slaveholders, proscribe him, for that single thing of difference between us.

In saying thus much in justification of my course in voting for Mr. Clay, I should be false to my own reputation, ungrateful to that large portion of Anti-Slavery men who have sympathized with me in my feeble efforts in the cause of Universal Liberty, and recreant to that glorious cause itself, if I did not avow my belief that the time is near at hand when public sentiment will not, ought not, and cannot hold the Slaveholder guiltless—Yes, I will go yet farther, and declare, in the name of the Christian Religion and our Republican Institutions, based professedly on the principle of 'the greatest good to the greatest number,' that no man, after the next Presidential election, when so much light shall have been shed upon this subject, should be deemed fit to rule over a Republican, Christian people, who shall violate, by holding slaves, the only true principles upon which either Christianity or Republicanism can stand the test of philosophical scrutiny for a single moment.

In conclusion, in refutation of the slanders of the Washington Globe, which are ever harmless where that print is known, in justice to Mr. Clay, and in vindication of my own self-respect, you will allow me to say, that my opinions and action upon the subject of Slavery are all my own; that, however much I may esteem Mr. Clay as a man, a statesman, and a friend—though I may regard him as one of the most frank, noble, practical, wise, eloquent, and patriotic of those who, in this or any other age, have assumed to govern a great Nation, the Editor of the Globe but makes exhibition of his own ignoble spirit, when he insinuates that Henry Clay would play a double part to deceive the American People, by dictating to me, or that I, humble as I may be in the estimation of my

country, would be used by him, or any other man, or set of men, for any dishonorable purpose, or be treated with upon any other terms than those of absolute equality.

Trusting that your wishes, as well as the purposes of those persons who have done me the honor to address me by letter upon this subject, will be best subserved by making this answer public, I send it at once to the press.

Respectfully your obedient servant,

C. M. CLAY.

P. S. Reform, in Jeremy Bentham's day, was termed "innovation;" this owl-faced age has improved in this respect,—now "fanaticism" is the word—a strong word—yet when will Americans learn it? There is a still stronger word than this,—"*Truth*." If there be really in all this wide Union, a single man of the McDuffie school, of good sense, cool, calculating, quick in the discernment of the "pith o' things," and above all no "enthusiast," let him read Thomas Carlyle's "*Sphinx*" in the "Past and Present," and then tell us whether there be a "*Sphinx*" also in America, and solve us the riddle! The description covers four pages—will not the "land of tracts" look to it?

C. M. C.

PETERBORO, March 29, 1844.

CASSIUS M. CLAY, Esq.

My Dear Sir: I have, this day, read your letter to the Mayor of Dayton. So, notwithstanding you had forty thousand dollars in slaves, and a slaveholding reputation and influence, which money could not measure, you have surrendered all, and ceased to be a slaveholder! God be praised for this glorious triumph of the truth, which American abolitionists have been inculcating, for the last twelve years! God be praised for having made them willing to suffer so much loss, and to count not even their lives dear unto themselves, for the sake of inculcating it! And thrice blessed be you—and you will be—for having yielded to its power! No victor so happy, be his conquests never so numerous and extolled, as he, who suffers himself to be conquered by truth. Such a one is, indeed, the greatest of conquerors. His captivity is the establishment in his own soul of the supremacy of virtue over vice—of right over wrong. It is the matchless victory of gaining the rule over one's own spirit.

I welcome your letter, not only because it condemns slave-

holding—condemns it as an outrage on republicanism and christianity ; but, because it lays down the principle, that a slaveholder is unfit to be a civil ruler. I wish, that the Northern political and religious press concurred with you, in this latter respect. But, even the New York Tribune—your favorite newspaper, to which you sent the letter lying before me—makes elaborate arguments against this principle, that the slaveholder is unworthy of civil office. I am very sorry to observe, that, even in your own mind, this principle is not one of entirely universal applicability. You plead for an exception to it : a single exception, it is true : and such an exception, as, I own, it seems rather ungracious to blame you for pleading for. Henry Clay is your kinsman, neighbor, friend. He has stood by you, and given you effective help in your most memorable perils. He is, withal, the leader, not to say idol, of that party, from which you are not yet fully weaned. Now, that, in these circumstances, you should purpose to vote for him, is, indeed, a fault—but a fault, so mitigated by those circumstances, that none, and, especially, they, who are the subjects of the admiration, gratitude, and love, excited by the emancipation of your numerous slaves, can find it easy to fix their eye upon, very steadily or sternly. And, what alleviates this fault still farther, is, that it is only for once more, you would have even Henry Clay voted for. Your proscription of slaveholders is to extend to him also, after the next Presidential Election. The dispensation of republicans and christians to vote for a buyer and seller of men even though he be Henry Clay himself, you would have cease, next November.

Your letter will be of immense service to the Anti-Slavery cause. Such testimony of one of the noblest minds of the South against slavery—testimony, no longer contradicted by your slaveholding ; but sustained, proven to be deeply sincere, and made solemn and impressive, by the emancipation of your slaves, will tell upon every Northern neighborhood. And even the declaration of your purpose to cast your vote for Henry Clay will work far less injury than many fear. For 1st, that vote is too obvious a violation of your own admitted principles, and too obvious an inconsistency with yourself, to carry much influence with it. 2d, it will be regarded as a yielding to the pressure of circumstances and to human weaknesses, rather than as the conclusion of wise, deliberate, unbiassed reasonings. 3d, those amongst us, who are hunting for excuses for their intended vote for Henry Clay, will not find any in your intention to vote for him. That you, his neighbor,

warm personal friend, and relative, should be irresistibly tempted to vote for him, is a fact, having no application to themselves—having no application to persons in circumstances so totally unlike your own.

Nevertheless, a little harm will mingle with the great good of your letter. We have a class of Abolitionists who are called, "The just-this-once men." They generally vote the anti-slavery ticket; but, occasionally, the intoxicating expedients of the pro-slavery parties prevail over their too easy principles, and they beg the privilege of voting, "just this once," with those parties—of bowing down again, "just this once," in the "House of Rimmon." It is true, that many of the causes of your voting for Henry Clay are to be found in your peculiar circumstances, and are, therefore, without any bearing on the persons of whom I speak. Notwithstanding, when they read your letter, and see, that you reserve to yourself the privilege of going, "just this once," in opposition to the principle of anti-slavery voting, they will be but too apt to feel, that they now have the authority of an eminently wise and upright man to justify the departure from it, of which they are themselves occasionally guilty. In vain, will it be for us to remind them, that your opposition to this principle is to be but for once; and that theirs has already been repeated. They will reply, that, the first time they violated this principle, they were as sure, that they should not violate it again, as Cassius M. Clay now is, that his adherence to it will never relax, after the next election.

I observe your two excuses for casting a pro-slavery vote, at the coming election. One is, that darkness prevails, in respect to the character and criminality of slavery; and that light will not take the place of this darkness, until after the election is past. Be it so, notwithstanding I totally fail to understand it, that the next election will prove to be the dividing line between darkness and light on this subject;—nevertheless, how will this give you, in whom "the darkness is past and the true light now shineth," the right to cast a pro-slavery vote, at that election? If all other men are, your letter shows, that you are not ignorant, that it is wrong to make a slaveholder a civil ruler. And, if, in their ignorance, all other men vote for a slaveholder, I know not what right you have to vote in their darkness, rather than in your own light; and to make their ignorance, rather than your own knowledge, the standard of your conduct. If, in the providence of God, your mind has been singled out for illumination by His truth, are you at liberty to defer to a benighted majority, and to act,

as it acts? I am aware, that Judge L. of Missouri denies the right to call in question the conduct of the majority: but I am also aware, that a higher authority than Judge L. says: "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil." So far from your being at liberty to act, in the supposed case, as the majority acts; you are to regard the revelation of truth to your mind as your commission and obligation to employ this truth for the enlightenment of that majority.

From the doctrine of your letter, that good men can, through ignorance, live even in great sins, few Abolitionists will be found to dissent. But you will pardon me for not being able to perceive, that either this doctrine, or your quotation from Macaulay, which, I cheerfully admit, serves to justify it, has any pertinence whatever to the question before us—has any bearing whatever on the point of voting. I find no fault with you for intimating, that Henry Clay is ignorant of the moral nature of slaveholding. I find no fault with you for numbering him, as you impliedly do, with "religious, great, good, and patriotic men." But what I contend for is, that you have no more right to vote for him, under the supposition, that he does not know the sinfulness of slavery—no more right to vote for him under the supposition, that he is a great and good, than under the supposition, that he is a little and bad man—no more right to vote for him, under the supposition, that he is a Christian, than under the supposition, that he is an infidel. And, in this connection, I would say, that the leading consideration of the Abolitionist in his vote is extensively misapprehended. Tens of thousands of persons suppose, that the Abolitionist, in his bigotry and narrowness, votes for his candidate, because he thinks him sinless; and withholds his vote from rival candidates, because he thinks them sinners. But, they are mistaken. The Abolitionist passes by pro-slavery tickets, not because the names on them are the names of sinners, but because they are the names of men, who, whether saints or sinners, will, if elected, refuse to wield their official power for the overthrow of slavery. He prefers the anti-slavery ticket, not because its names are those of sinless men, but because they are the names of men, who, however imperfect their practices or principles, will, if elected, use their office, as far as they constitutionally can, to deliver the land from the curse of slavery. In all this the Abolitionist exhibits good sense. When I am choosing a man to act for me, I must see to it, that I make choice of one, who will act upon, and act out, my own principles. When I am voting to fill the office, which has power to grant, or withhold, licenses for

making drunkards, I am to concern myself, not so much about the general religious character of the candidates, as about the question of their faithfulness to the principles of temperance. So too, when I am voting to fill the office of President of the United States, it is an insufficient excuse for my pro-slavery vote to say, as you virtually do: "The man, for whom I am voting, is, indeed, in favor of slavery; but, he does not know slavery to be wrong; and he is, moreover, a 'religious, great, good, and patriotic man.'"

I have, as I trust, shown the fallacy of one of your excuses for voting for Henry Clay. The other is, that he is sound, in respect to several questions in political economy, which you enumerate, and that his election is important to the proper disposal of these questions. Now, I will, if you please, admit all that you claim for Henry Clay concerning these questions: and yet, yourself being judge—your own letter being my authority—he is not entitled to your vote. I know, that your letter says, that the election of Henry Clay and the proper disposal of these questions, are necessary to prepare the way for triumphant action against slavery; and, I allow, that in your belief of this, you have, at least, a show of excuse for voting for him. But, I know too, that your letter also virtually says, that, be his financial or other views what they may, provided he remains a slaveholder after the next election, he will, and, that, too, whatever may be the result of such election—however unfavorable, in your eyes, its bearing on the economical questions referred to—be unworthy of the office of a civil ruler. I put it to you then, dear sir, kindly, but irresistibly, whether I need summon any other witness to the stand than yourself, to prove the emptiness of this other excuse for your vote for Henry Clay, and to deprive you of even all show of excuse under this head for such an unjustifiable vote?

But, it is harsh to use a man for his own condemnation—and in the present instance, entirely unnecessary. Your excuse can easily be shown to be unsound, without quoting yourself against yourself. It cannot, for a moment, abide the test of christianity. I mean not the spurious christianity of this land, but the pure christianity of the Bible.

1st. God does not sacrifice the least right of the least being in all His universe. To believe that He does, is to believe Him to be unjust, and to destroy the very foundation of our confidence in Him. 2d. All men should feel, that they are His servants, and that their conduct must harmonize with His principles and character. The Bible, declares impartiality to be an attribute not of God only, but also (Mat. v. 45,)

of all them, who are counted worthy to be His children. 3d. When then we barter away the great, original, inherent, rights of one man for another man's more secure possession of such rights; and, most emphatically, when we take these sacred rights from one man, and barter them away for the promotion of the mere pecuniary interests of another, we outrage some of the plainest principles of the Divine government, and prove ourselves to be Atheists and rebels, instead of the servants of God. 4th. But, is not the willingness of certain anti-slavery men to elect a slaveholder to the Presidency, provided his views, in respect to the 'Tariff' and other financial measures, agree with their own, red with the guilt of the worst kind of such a barter? Do they not virtually say: "We will consent to leave the slaves of the District of Columbia and of the Territory of Florida in their chains, for the sake of securing an improvement in the pecuniary circumstances of the whites?—for the sake of it in our own circumstances?" Thousands of professing Christians are, this day, defending such compromises, and declaring them to be indispensable. But, before I can be convinced, that men can innocently, and must necessarily, practice such compromises, I must be convinced, that God is so great a bungler, as not to be able to carry on His government, without invading the rights of some of His subjects.

I see, that you approvingly quote the maxim: "The greatest good of the greatest number." The frequent repetition of this maxim in the celebrated letters of "O. P. Q." written, a dozen years ago, in the city of Paris, gave it a fresh and increased popularity. But, the maxim is no less false than popular. Christianity requires "the greatest good of the *whole* number." It is in accordance with this maxim, that the individual is so often sacrificed in answer to the claims of society. Society has proved itself to be a bloody Moloch, on whose altar millions of individuals have been slain. It is in accordance with this maxim, that nations give up millions of individuals to be slaughtered on the battle field. And this same maxim is the justifying plea of slavery for crushing millions in its iron folds. Would that the practice under this maxim did not exceed its letter! But, like every other permitted wrong, it transcends its prescribed limits. A community sets out to promote "the greatest good of the greatest number," by means of the sacrifice of a small number. But, soon however, the foul and murderous wrong grows into the policy of benefitting a select and aristocratic few, at the expense of the many. Who will deny, that it has already thus increased and magnified itself in South Carolina, Mississippi, and Lou-

isiana, in each of which States the slave population exceeds the free?—the sacrificed the sacrificers?

God be praised for the plain teaching of His word, that one man's rights stand not in the way of another's—that one man's happiness interferes not with another's—that every man is every other man's brother—nay more, that every man is bound to see in every other man another self. My friend, my brother, from the bottom of my heart do I commend to you this plain teaching. You have—and blessed be God for it!—you have begun to drink of its spirit. Drink deeper of it; and you will then be prepared to say, that, come what will of Banks and Tariffs, and other dollars and cents questions, you will never again vote power over the slave into the hands of the slaveholder. Drink deeper of it; and you will then regard all such questions, as but “the small dust of the balance,” compared with personal rights. Drink deeper of it; and you will then be ready to admit, that the least right of the least infant amongst the tens of thousands of our fellow immortals, whom slavery treads under foot in the District of Columbia and in Florida, and who are thus trodden on with the express approbation of our General Government and of Henry Clay, is entitled to an infinitely more solicitous protection, at the hands of that Government and of Henry Clay, than are all the pecuniary interests of all the nation.

I rejoice, that you did not find it in your heart to give a negative answer to the question, whether, if you were a citizen of Ohio, you would vote the Liberty Party Electoral ticket; or to the question, whether, if there were such a ticket in your own State, you would vote it. Liberty will, probably, have no ticket in Kentucky, the present year. If she should have, you would find it much harder to refuse to vote it, than to vote for Henry Clay. Would, my dear Sir, that you might experience such a baptism of the spirit of Liberty, as should make you willing to cast a solitary vote for her! Would that she might irresistibly impel you to compose a vote of the names of black men, if there are not white men—ay, of slaves even, if there are not freemen, in your State, to represent your anti-slavery principles. Posterity would accord more honor to you for casting such a vote, than to your distinguished namesake for the most triumphant success of his highest ambition.

Pardon me, dear Sir, that I have so freely expressed the concern of my heart, respecting the character of your vote. Take, if you please, in return, the like liberty with me and the anti-slavery men of the North. Tell us, how you would have us vote. If you shall not vote an anti-slavery electoral

ticket next Fall, you will have the excuse, that no such ticket was nominated in Kentucky. But, if we shall not vote one, it will not be for such a lack, and we shall not have such an excuse. There will be anti-slavery electoral tickets in all the free States. Shall we vote them? I anticipate your emphatic affirmative reply. Were we not to vote them, your heart would grieve bitterly over our unfaithfulness to the cause, which is dearer to you than any other cause. If you shall not vote an anti-slavery ticket, another of your excuses, as we have seen, will be, that you dwell in the midst of great darkness respecting slavery. But, if we shall not—we, who live where floods of light are poured forth on this subject—you would yourself be among the very first to reproach us with our utterly excuseless “fellowship with the works of darkness.” If you shall not vote an anti-slavery ticket next Fall, you will, as we have already said your letter informs us, make as much of an excuse, as you can, out of the fact, that you voted in accordance with your views on the Tariff and certain other questions in political economy. But, it by no means follows, that you would have us turn away from our anti-slavery tickets to vote for men, who will represent our views on such questions. All of us have sympathy with the Whigs or Democrats on these questions—a part with one, and a part with the other; and, therefore, were our votes to follow this sympathy, there would be no Liberty Party left. It would be reabsorbed by those parties, from which we came out—and from which we came out for the very reason, that they allow these questions to come into competition with, and even to merge, the claims of the slave. The Liberty Party, which you had the honesty and courage so recently to eulogize in a public meeting in your own State, would then be wrecked and ruined. The American anti-slavery cause would then have perished from the treachery of its own friends. I know, that from such inevitable consequences of our suffering the consideration of dollars and cents, instead of that of inalienable human rights, to govern our votes, your spirit recoils, as promptly and as widely, as our own; and, that, whilst you are yourself yielding to the peculiar and strong temptations to leave your own duty undone, you bid us go forward and manfully do ours. Rest assured, my dear Sir, that we shall not disobey such righteous instructions. If you can afford to cast one more pro-slavery vote, we cannot. We have repented too sorely of our past voting against the slave, that we should ever again repeat the enormous crime. And, besides, we have stood by him too long, that we should now forsake

him. We will continue to hold up the standard of freedom, as well as such feeble ones can. Next Autumn will witness your last sin against your enslaved brethren; and then your strong hands will also grasp that standard; and then, too, thousands and tens of thousands will flock to it, under the inspiration of your example. Slavery will succeed in the approaching election. A slaveholder, or a guiltier servant of slavery, will then be elected to the Chief Magistracy. But, one consolation under so painful a conclusion is, that this will be the last national political triumph of this system of matchless fraud and horrors. The Presidential election, four years hence, if indeed God shall spare our guilty nation so long, will write upon our standard: "Jehovah has triumphed—His people are free." I am, dear Sir, with great regard, your friend,

GERRIT SMITH.

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